

The Christian

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Edited by
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News-Letter

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DEAR MEMBER,

Presiding over the annual meeting of the World Congress of Faiths a few weeks ago, the Bishop of Chichester made a strong plea for properly accredited representatives of the great religions of the world to come together after the war to take counsel how they might strengthen the will of men everywhere for peace.

In regard to the end which the Bishop has in view, namely, the restoration of moral and spiritual authority in the affairs of mankind, we are in the fullest agreement; its vital importance is the theme of this week's Supplement. But the question of method is another matter, and an examination of the Bishop's proposals in this address and in a speech he made in the House of Lords last April may help to clarify our thoughts about the tasks of the future.

CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS

The Bishop is plainly concerned not merely with the enunciation of moral standards, but with making them effective in public life. He desires action which will influence what takes place in the political sphere.

But common action by the representatives of different religions implies a core of common religious and ethical belief. The Bishop made it quite plain in his speech to the World Congress of Faiths that a world amalgamation of religions is abhorrent to him and that he was speaking as a Christian with the whole Bible and Christian tradition behind him. He does not assume an underlying religious unity. But since (as he recognized) there are bad religions, and bad elements in religions, as well as good, he was driven to find some principle to provide a basis of co-operation.

In his speech in the House of Lords he suggested an association of those who agree in worshipping a sovereign Creator. The question would then arise whether this would allow the inclusion of Buddhists. And even if it be held that Buddhism is not atheistic, it remains true that it is just in their conceptions of God that the differences between the religions are most profound.

In his address to the World Congress of Faiths the Bishop suggested as a basis of co-operation belief in, and devotion to, justice and love. But here again there are wide differences in the understanding of these terms, and we have to take account also of the fact that many agnostics and rationalists have shown themselves as ardent in the cause of justice as the followers of religion. There does not appear to be any good reason why in the social and political sphere Christians should not co-operate as readily with those who aim at justice without any profession of religion as with those whose religious beliefs differ from their own. The case of Russia is specially instructive. There can be no world

peace or stable international order without Russian participation. But the rulers of that country, who are professed atheists, could hardly be expected to pay much attention to the conclusions of a spiritual authority in which they had no part.

That it is a good thing for the adherents of different religions to come to know and learn from one another cannot be doubted by anyone whose outlook has been widened and insight deepened through friendships with men of other faiths. That the representatives of different religions can with great mutual advantage discuss together their respective faiths is just as little open to dispute. But it is a serious question whether when they come together for this purpose, the first thing they have to do is not to discuss their *differences*. There is no major religious issue on which the great religions, or some of them, are not in flat contradiction with one another.

If, on the other hand, the representatives of different religions are brought together, as the Bishop proposes, for the common achievement of a practical objective, the fundamental fact of their differences of necessity recedes into the background. The undertaking becomes infected with an element of unreality. The impression is inevitably created in the minds of those who take part that their agreement is wider and deeper than it actually is. And the wider public outside is confirmed in the belief, to which it is readily disposed, that, as Sir Samuel Ranganadan, an Indian Christian, is reported to have said at the meeting of the World Congress of Faiths, at bottom all religions are the same. Nothing could be further from the truth.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

The question that needs clearing up is whether, where political action is concerned, the right objective is co-operation between representatives of different *religions as such*. If there is to be an international order Christians will undoubtedly have to co-operate with Indians, Chinese, Turks, Russians and many others. But in the political sphere the co-operation will be with them not primarily as believers in particular religions, but as citizens of particular countries. Those who participate will in fact hold different religious beliefs and be under the influence of traditions, customs and habits of thought which religion has done much to form, and each will bring to the joint discussion insights and inspiration derived from his own faith. But the actual bond will be similarity of political principles and aims rather than similar religious beliefs.

The need to distinguish clearly between the religious and political spheres is also evident when we examine the means proposed for attaining the end. In the debate in the House of Lords the Bishop made two tentative suggestions. The first was that something might be achieved by drawing up a common code of rules. The second was that alongside of whatever international authority may be set up there should be an association of representatives of religions which would have access to the international authority when questions of international morality are involved.

A common code of rules would receive scant attention and exert negligible influence if it were offered to Governments from without. If, on the other hand, it were to express the sincere intentions of the

leading Governments on which, with whatever incidental backslidings and occasional mistakes of judgment, they were resolved to act, it would undoubtedly signalize a great moral advance in the history of mankind. But this could be real only if it were rooted in common moral convictions widely shared by all the peoples concerned. This moral agreement and common ethos is at present not even remotely in sight.

But even if a common code of rules were acknowledged, the difficulty would remain of applying it. We are thus brought to the Bishop's second suggestion of a standing body of spiritual advisers who will offer advice to the international authority in concrete instances. The difficulty here is that in politics (as in the social and economic sphere) the making of decisions is seldom a matter of applying an unassailable principle to a particular instance. Very often the difficulty is how to reconcile two conflicting principles, and even when the principle is clear, the nut which the statesman has to crack is that the choices open to him are limited, and what he has to decide is which of them will best give effect to the principle or, in some instances, do the least violence to it. That can be decided only by a right appraisal of the facts.

This truth has never been better expressed than in the words addressed by Burke to a member of the French Assembly, which, though they are familiar, deserve to be set down again here, because what they assert is continually forgotten.

"Permit me to say that if I were as confident as I ought to be diffident in my own loose general ideas, I should never venture to broach them, if but at twenty leagues' distance from the centre of your affairs. I must see with my own eyes, I must, in a manner, touch with my own hands, not only the fixed, but the momentary, circumstances, before I could venture to suggest any political project whatsoever. I must know the power and disposition to accept, to execute, to persevere. I must see all the aids and all the obstacles. . . . I must see the things ; I must see the men. Without a concurrence and adaptation of these to the design, the very best speculative projects might become not only useless, but mischievous."

An apt illustration is the question of the release of political prisoners in India referred to in our last issue. On the one side there is the prize of initiating a new era of understanding and co-operation in India ; on the other the risk of civil disorder, paralysis of the administration, and imperilling the cause of the United Nations on which far-reaching interests of mankind appear to depend. No outside body could advise Lord Wavell on the basis of moral principle alone ; the problem arises from the fact that there are weighty moral considerations on both sides. Those who have to take the decision must know all the circumstances ; they must know the men. They must guess how they will act, and the guess is likely to be right in proportion to the fullness and accuracy of the information available.

If for the reasons that have been given we cannot in this matter follow the lead of the Bishop of Chichester, what other means can we adopt to bring public affairs under the control of moral purpose ? It is with the object of focussing attention on this vital question that we have discussed his proposals. Part of the answer is given in the Supplement. Moral ideas are effective when they are embodied in a national

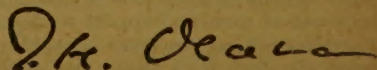
tradition and practice. The major task to which Christians in Great Britain have to address themselves is to bring its domestic and foreign policy into accord with the standards of our Christian tradition, so that it may serve the world by its example.

But while our first duty is to act in the sphere most immediately open to our influence, we naturally think as Christians of the resources of Christianity as a whole. We are concerned that the Churches of the British Dominions and the United States should discover fresh sources of moral power in their Christian heritage, that the Christian tradition of Europe should be revived and restored, and that the younger Churches in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world should be a vitalizing force in the social development of these areas. We can support without reserve the other proposal which the Bishop of Chichester has put forward, namely, that as soon as possible after the war there should be a conference of representatives of the Christian Churches, Catholic and Protestant, from both the belligerent and the neutral countries. Such a conference would meet on a broad common ground of religious and moral agreement, and could proceed at once to discuss measures of practical co-operation, without spending time on the fruitless discussion of irreconcilable differences or falling into the futility of pretending that they do not exist. No one has done more in recent years to promote international Christian co-operation than the Bishop of Chichester, and for his unflagging zeal in this cause we owe him an irrepayable debt of gratitude.

CHRISTMAS

Each generation gains, or may gain, through its historical experiences a fresh understanding of the meaning of Christmas. The claim of Christ to be the Light of the world has an enhanced significance when it is seen in relation to the acute problem which is considered this week in both the News-Letter and the Supplement. In proportion to our awareness of what is at stake in the question whether force or goodness is to be the ultimate controlling influence in human affairs, we shall understand the vastness of the difference which it makes that in the actual texture of history the essential meaning of the universe should have been spoken forth in a human life wholly surrendered to the service of truth, goodness and love—that the WORD should have become FLESH.

Yours sincerely,



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THE OBLIGATIONS OF OUR HERITAGE

An article on "The English and the Continent," by Professor Michael Polanyi in the current issue (Oct.-Dec.) of the *Political Quarterly*¹ has so direct a bearing on the main concerns of the Christian News-Letter, that it seems appropriate to give the gist of it in a Supplement. The editor of the *Political Quarterly* has given permission to quote freely from the article, and Professor Polanyi has allowed me to see a fuller memorandum, of which I have made use as well as of the published paper. The writer of the article came to this country from Hungary about ten years ago to become Professor of Chemistry in Manchester University, and is one of the most eminent among living scientists in his special field.

In the first part of the Supplement I am reproducing, very largely in the author's own words, the substance of the article. It is only at the end that I add one or two comments of my own.

MORALITY AND POLITICS ON THE CONTINENT

Professor Polanyi warns us that the defeat of the Axis Powers will not in itself re-establish in Europe faith in the power of reason and equity to direct human affairs. The vital question is whether mankind makes up its mind that force alone determines the events of history or whether the victory of the Allies will be used to demonstrate the reality and strength of the moral standards for which they profess to stand.

At the close of last century progressive movements were making steady progress in almost all the countries of Europe. Owing to the tendency of the Church on the continent to identify itself with political reaction these movements were in the main anti-religious, but at the same time definitely idealistic. Their appeal was to justice; they were fighting for the freedom of individuals and nations against oppression and exploitation.

But the seeds of a conception of politics that rejected morality as its guide had also been widely sown. Marx had given such a philosophy systematic formulation. He sought to obliterate all references to eternal justice, human equality and the rights of individuals and nations, which were the stock-in-trade of the democratic movements of his time, and insisted that public life is moved by objective forces arising out of the class-struggle, and that progress consists in the inevitable annihilation of one class by another. Consequently, the only rational end of political action is to achieve power for the rising class. Ethical considerations are irrelevant and must be resolutely set aside.

Maxims of power and violence were promulgated also by nationalist writers, particularly in Germany. But they had to wait for clear and

¹ Macmillan & Co. 5s. Annual Subscription, £1.

consistent formulation until Fascism proclaimed the total subordination of law and morality to national aims—to the supposedly inevitable life-and-death struggle of the rising nations against those in decay.

A similar revolt against morality was also in progress in matters of individual conduct. The right of the exceptional individual to be a law to himself met with increasing acceptance; it was widely agreed that the only responsibility of the man of genius, and even of any one of special talent, was to cultivate his own unique gifts and to achieve the fullest self-expression. Restrictions imposed from outside could only cripple his true function.

At the turn of the century the two theories of political violence and personal immorality began to converge. In Dostoevsky's novels we find portrayed the emerging figure of the unscrupulous benefactor of mankind.

This conception inspired Lenin's action, when in 1917 he unhesitatingly struck down the newly elected Russian Constituent Assembly and threw into prison its leading figures, veteran fighters against Tsarist oppression. This was the first manifestation on a major scale of the new methods of unlimited political violence which have since been predominant on the continent. Lenin's actions were undoubtedly directed to achieving the greatest benefit of mankind, as he understood it. But no such claim can conceivably be made for the various Fascist governments. Their aims were frankly rapacious, and with them brutality had become an end in itself.

During the period following the Russian revolution both the Third International and the various Fascist movements succeeded in attracting a large part of the intellectual forces on the continent. The consequence is that there are millions in Europe to-day who have never heard the principles of reason and justice upheld as guides in human affairs, who have been taught to distrust moral ideals as cheap pretences, kept up by the "haves" to restrain the "have-nots," and to whom the only thing in political life is—in Lenin's phrase "Who whom?"—to devour or be devoured.

BRITAIN FOLLOWS A DIFFERENT ROAD

From his observation of civic life in Britain, Professor Polanyi concludes that the principal difference between British (and also, so far as he can judge, American) and continental politics is due to the fact that in England social progress has not, as on the continent, been associated with rationalism and anti-clericalism; but, on the contrary, largely inspired by religious sentiment. Even when the religious foundations were explicitly rejected, political ideas did not venture far away from them. To a continental the utilitarian principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number appears superficial. The truth is that political thinkers like Bentham, J. S. Mill and Herbert Spencer did not concern themselves with the ultimate foundations of the spiritual life. They took for granted that the individual conscience, which religion had disciplined, was a sufficient guarantee that men would pursue happiness with fairness and self-restraint.

The reverse side of this is that throughout the Victorian period no need was felt to explore the ultimate possibilities of human immorality. The problems of situations in which "everything is permitted" were never faced. As was observed by John Morley, the excellence of the English in civic matters tended to reduce the range of their intellectual adventures.

Thus by the close of the nineteenth century the British had established a national civilization of their own based on the principles of toleration and freedom under the reign of law, and guided by standards of decency in both individual and social relations.

But things began to change. "All civilizations are based on faith and are, therefore, essentially unstable formations. The first world war appears to have profoundly impaired the continuity of the Anglo-American tradition. It swept away the Victorian morals, introduced the Freudian aversion to repressions, spread contempt of conventional manners and obligations, and greatly reduced the observance of religious practice."

A more direct influence on public affairs was the horror of war which struck the people of Great Britain. To avoid war became the principal aim of public policy, and this led to a deep questioning of the very idea of the nation. "The desire to escape from the mortal dangers of nationhood gave rise to a deep belief in the League of Nations. But it was a disembodied faith unsupported by any instinctive allegiance, unguided by any profound inspiration. Marxist ideas began to gain influence over the parties of the Left, and the Fascist example to exercise a fascination in circles of the Right. The national body of Great Britain was thus tending to fall into two opposite camps and develop foreign methods. Civic indifference, the view that to the common people it does not matter who governs the country, was eating its way into the national fibre. Thus a great nation in the fullness of power and fresh from victory suddenly abandoned its moral purpose as a nation and fell into a rapid process of disintegration."

THE NATIONAL REVIVAL

More suddenly even than its former decline, however, came the restoration of the national will in England after Dunkirk. The Prime Minister did not in his speeches make explicit reference to the moral tradition of the country, but he assumed it, and upheld its majesty. He spoke to the people "of honour and duty; of the hope of Englishmen to give a good account of themselves; of the evil that was facing them and of their privilege in facing it alone." In the darkest hour of our civilization it was patriotism that proved the source from which men's moral ideas were in fact restored.

"When England invoked its own past, it recalled the Dominions, it recalled America and the whole of Europe to their common moral traditions. It would seem that in every part of the world—and here I definitely include also Russia—the process of moral reintegration has been achieved on national lines. National feeling seems to be the only sentiment to-day in which that responsible devotion to a community

can be rooted, that bond of mutual confidence assured, which are needed if reason and equity are to gain acceptance as the guides of human affairs."

The fateful question of the future is whether Great Britain will in the end succumb to the idea that nothing is real but power and the possession of things that can satisfy bodily appetites, or will succeed in preserving, strengthening and communicating by example its own tradition and pattern of liberty, toleration and the obligation of the moral law.

"Nothing will grow from moral unbelief. The bolder our plans for the future, the deeper must they be rooted in the original ideas of our civilization."

DEBTORS TO HISTORY

The significance of Professor Polanyi's paper is that he is not presenting us with abstract ideas, but speaking of actual realities, of the existence of which he is profoundly aware and helps to make us also aware. The position in which our nation stands to-day is not of its own making. It has been made for us by history. We owe it to the grace of God that we are the heirs of a tradition which has kept the corrosion of the false ideas that have gained ascendancy on the continent from eating as deeply into our national life.

The article is important also for its forcible reminder that, in order to become effective and powerful, moral ideas need to find embodiment in a national tradition and way of life. There is no way in which we can better serve the future than by dedicating ourselves to the hard, plodding task of restoring and strengthening the spiritual foundations of our own nation and empire.

If the United Nations are victorious the British Commonwealth will hold a position of immense power; with America and Russia it will have a principal voice in shaping the future of mankind. It inherits a tradition of incalculable value that all power is a trust. But we shall not fulfil the great destiny that may be ours either by exulting in our power or boasting of our tradition. That would be a fatal pre-occupation with ourselves; all self-centredness leads in the end to death. It is only through response to the call of God in humility and self-forgetfulness that we can realize our destiny and serve mankind.

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